

Ce qu'a vu le vent de l'Est: Asian influences on contemporary piano music

1. Intro

“The paradox is irresoluble: the less one culture communicates with another, the less likely they are to be corrupted, one by the other; but on the other hand, the less likely it is, in such conditions, that the respective emissaries of these cultures will be able to seize the richness and significance of their diversity. The alternative is inescapable: either I am a traveller in ancient times, and faced with a prodigious spectacle which would be almost entirely unintelligible to me and might, indeed, provoke me to mockery or disgust; or I am a traveller of my own day, hastening in search of a vanished reality. In either case I am the loser...for today, as I go groaning among the shadows, I miss inevitably the spectacle that is now taking shape.” (C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*).

This quote gives a good indication of the poles we avoided during the selection of tonight concert's material: obviously not degradation of the Other through turning our gaze away, nor some sort of procrustean idealization in the well-known form of exoticism. Instead, we choose to focus on contemporary works which, through the influence of Asian musics and philosophies, suggest new solutions to structural questions. Those are the ones around the nature and essence of sound in one hand, and the temporal perception -which in the new music jargon translates as form, continuity and discontinuity, determinacy and indeterminacy- on the other. Those structural issues are inevitably resonating with the very specifics of piano performance: texture, articulation, dynamics, pedaling and so on. In the course of this lecture, we will have the chance to explore those structural resonances through a transnational and transhistorical web of references, from the ancient Chinese *I-Ching* to the Indian treatise *Samgitaratnakara* and from the Japanese concepts of *Ma* and *Jo-Ha-Kyu* to Middle-eastern instrumental and temporal idioms.

2. Sound

Let us begin with some very general observations concerning the manipulation of sound in Western and Eastern musical cultures respectively.

Starting with our familiar Western condition, we could argue that we have inherited an understanding of sound as a potential carrier of meaning linguistically organized. One of the main shaping forces in the history of Western music, according to Thrasyvoulos Georgiadis in his *Musik und Sprache*¹, is a relationship of complementarity and antagonism between the inseparable components of ancient greek “*musiké*” (music and language), in a double process which he describes as musicalization of language and verbalization of music, and which he traces in the course of the development of the religious Mass over 11 centuries of European music. Linguistic models of micro- and macro-structure seem to be diachronically pervasive: This becomes quite clear when one examines the terminology developed for the analysis of musical form and syntax: motif, theme, sentence, period, cadence.. But even before that crystallization, Baroque theories of composition as rhetorics, as well as the development of Romantic performance-related terminology such as interpretation, recital etc never conceal their lineage to language. Talking about musical form and its linguistic roots, special mention should be made here to the notion of repetition as a basic generator of form (for some even meaning), through its opposition to variation and contrast-all these corresponding to the articulation of musical ideas rather than musical sounds. In modernist composition, the repetition's ontological status is often severely problematized and it can be altogether abolished as compositional weakness. (Schoenberg's words of caution regarding unvaried recapitulations, as they appear in his theoretical texts, are highly representative of the fact).

The linguistic origins and elaborations of musical form are craving the use of sound as a building block in the service of musical ideas: isolated sounds are manipulated as first materials in the articulation of complex polyphonic and large-scale formations. (An attitude which triggered Cage's famous cry for “Letting sounds be themselves”). This rationalization of sound, as reflected in the gradual development of hyper-specific notation, tuning systems and equal temperament, even schools of performance practice, shapes beauty ideals: Clarity, richness of tone, and fixity of pitch are some of those characteristics which still inform westerner's responses to music, be it Western or not.

Moving on to Asia, and always risking the danger of a crude overgeneralization given the vast diversity of the musical cultures under examination, we would argue that: perception of sound *per se*, in an almost metaphysical way (Helmut Lachenmann doesn't hesitate to speak about pure magic, when it comes to such questions) is a main aspect of the musical experience and the main carrier of essence, rather than meaning. Of course, this is already said with the proviso that many of the characteristics discussed above as Western-specific (such as the development of highly complex and rationalized musical cultures, which can be treating individual sounds as building blocks, as well as the strong shaping

1. Georgiadis, Thrasyvoulos. *Musik und Sprache. Das Werden der abendlaedischen Musik dargestellt an der Vertonung der Messe*. Berlin-Goettingen-Heidelberg, 1954

of music and language from each other) are still valid in most Asian musical cultures. However, the understanding of a central importance of sound *per se* in those cultures is closely linked to their very special sociopolitical constitution and the role of music in that. In other words, music in Asia never abolishes its religious origin, in contrast to Western music which undergoes a gradual secularization, leading to its formulation as an art-form in the modern sense.

Religions and philosophies in Asia perceive sound as identical with the divine substance. Let's look at some of the sources:

In ancient China, "right" music is a central issue of balance and order, both cosmic and political. According to Confucius "in order to know music you have to know tones and to know tones you have to know sound", in a hierarchy which shapes century-long aspects of Chinese music. For the Sufis: "sound gives consciousness a proof of its existence", and is used as the royal road to a union with the Divine. In India, music-making aims at the individual's harmonization with higher spheres. Hinduist concepts like *manga* (path), *yoga* (knowledge, evolution), *makti* (revelation), are incorporated in the practice of Indian musicians, even when they come from different religious or ethnic backgrounds. The mystic influence of sound is always respected, even in rationalized constructions such as *ragas* and *talas*, through their unbroken connection to non-musical states and temporalities.

The special ontological status of sound, as outlined in those brief examples, dictates a rather different attitude both towards the notion of repetition, as well as the development of sound ideals. As for the first, repetition is considered a source of power and a basic tool in the path towards ecstasy and the broadening of consciousness. As for the second, we will immediately sample some examples which position indeterminacy and instability of pitch in the center of sound ideals in Asia. In his article "Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Western Composers"², Chou Wen-Chung, a student of Edgar Varèse and a seminal figure in the research around Asian influences on 20th cent. music, extracts the following basic characteristics out of the incredibly diverse mosaic of Asian cultures, and looks at their relationships to contemporary music trends:

- i) Heterophonic practices, multilayered structures, affinity for the distinctive sonority of massive sonic surfaces "consisting of melodic, rhythmic, registral and timbral variants of a single linear movement" in ensemble music (like the Balinese Gamelan and Japanese Gagaku).
- ii) Microtonic richness, decoration, sophisticated use of non-pitched percussive instruments and employment of noise.
- iii) An extra focus on the production and control of sounds: Articulation, subtlest variations of timbre and pitch, dynamic fluctuation, tremoli and vibrati are of the utmost importance in the education and performance of instruments such as the Chinese Ch'in, the Japanese Sakuhachi, the Korean Piri. A very characteristic testament is found in the Chein tzu notation for Ch'in: one ideogram for each specific sound-event, the latter ranging from an isolated attack to a phrase, plus tablature-like information for both hands, bringing in mind the complex corporeally-oriented notation of several layers of multi-parametrical strata in cutting-edge composition today. Poetic imagery taken from nature is often an indispensable part of the description of a specific hand movement or sound quality. Interesting parallels could be drawn here between this emphasis and the weberian (and post-weberian) concern for texture defined mostly in regard to articulation, timbre, register, duration etc. - in short, the affinity for the characteristics of individual tones.
- iv) Finally, violence and penetrating sound qualities are holding a respectable place in a soundscape that imposes ecstasy and awakening (Lachenmannian "magic"). The foreshadowing of feelings, situations, intensities is considered to be the main virtue in the instrumental techniques associated with the Japanese theatre No. Many "extreme" and unconventional instrumental techniques associated with contemporary music might be directly originating to Asia: f.e. Henry Cowell's early exposure to Asian music is cited as a possible explanation for his affinity for early extended techniques in the piano (clusters and inside the instrument).

Let us now identify some of the elements mentioned above in the tonight concert's soundscape.

Piano distance is an early piece by T. Takemitsu, certainly one of the most distinct before his piano writing turns towards a more colourful and "easy", Messiaen-like, direction. In terms of its sonic world, and in close relation to what was said before about the "sound *per se*" Asian ideals, we could define it as a celebration of the isolated event. Let us elaborate a bit on what this notion could refer to: Isolated long sustained notes, resembling islands of sound, appear in the continuum of time-silence. Around them appear and develop other point-like events: violent isolated attacks, groups of *laissez vibrez* graces, longer phrases in various registers, in the course of which other isolated events occur. Maybe even more important than the events themselves, is what lies between them, the silence or sonority which seems to very smoothly correspond to the Japanese notion of space/vacuum in Zen, the non-thinking space called the *Ma*. Certainly, the nature of the temporal structure itself, to be analyzed later on (non-pulsar, breathing, discontinuous, employing spatial notation) stresses the individual sound-event, turning the listeners' attention to details of articulation, dynamics,

2. Wen-Chung, Chu. "Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Western Composers"

The Musical Quarterly, Vol 57, No 2 (Apr. 1971), 211-229, Oxford University Press

register, pedal: non-structural elements, according to Western historical standards. In short, the concept of point has defeated the concept of the line. While long lines of events can be identified, and could even be sought after in a performative strategy of the piece more in resonance with ideals of narrative-like continuity, we can equally say that the notion of the point is threatening the primacy of the line in the listener's and, why not, even the performer's perception, dictating very original performative responses.

Following up with Dusapin's *Etude nr. 3*, a clearly more continuous, almost lyrical work, drawing its melismatic lines from distinctly Middle-eastern and Mediterranean vocal and instrumental vocabularies (psalters like the canun and cimbalom are often brought in mind by the instrumental technique), we find again a rather special balance between the line and the point: Minimal melodies on a note or two predominate. Melodic continuity—the notion of line as usually employed in Western music—is put under question in ways different from Takemitsu's: via repeated notes with subtly fluctuating characteristics, turning here into a powerful expressive, specifically lamenting (as the composer's characterisation of the entire work as *Etudes de Tristesse* allows), device. Notation exhaustive as far as articulation and dynamics are concerned, in the context of a rather limited, modal-like, gamut of pitches, has its own contribution to a sound ideal away from continuity, into a more fragmented direction, violently expressive, turbulent, but still static—something like the violent shine of Mediterranean sun on the desert or a rocky landscape. The soundscape is completed with excessive use of the sustaining pedal, which almost creates some form of harmonic space and expansive quality, rather than a massive effect. The sophisticated harmonic language is shaped through groups of graces *laissez vibrez* mixing together, very much after Murail's notion of “the piano as a sonorous chamber”.

We would like to continue our brief reference to sound with I. Xenakis' sound ideals, as they are drawn from *Mists*. The very title of the work already prepares the listener for a soundscape far from classical ideas of clarity and easily discernible shapes—also far from the rather easier differentiation between points and lines as discussed in the previous pieces. Xenakis' own introductory note to the piece comes to reinforce this impression, with its reference to sound through an impressively materialist vocabulary for dense textures and complex movements: “sonic clouds of specific density”, “clusters of melodic lines rotating in time-space”, “Brownian movements”, are terms which refreshingly counterbalance the strict mathematical ideas underlying their composition.

The very first section of the piece consists of pitch, scale-like, series, which rather consistently explore the whole tessitura of the instrument in a linear way. In another instance of counterbalance to the strict mathematic vocabulary, we might afford our own “sensual” description: these ascending scales resemble jungle-like stellae blossoming towards the sky, very much after Takemitsu's description of his impression of Gagaku music: “Certainly, I was impressed by the ascending sounds that towered toward heaven like a tree” (Takemitsu: 6-8)³. This image might be grouping together some of the most important aspects of Xenakis' sound-world: The “out-of-time” structure of these scales is by default a frozen, static sonic sculpture, acquiring its characteristic dynamism through the tension of the intervallic construction (the analogy between larger and smaller intervals, as Xenakis mentions in one of his famous interviews to Varga⁴), the “in-time” polyrhythmic interweaving of lines into a wall of sound, and the extremity of dynamics. (A relative point made in one of those interviews by Xenakis places a great emphasis on the performer's ability to sustain one single tone, as well as project the sound—in contrast to traditional notions of virtuosity and the use of vibrato). Xenakis summarizes “If you can blend sounds into a kind of mixture, leading away from the tones of an individual instrument, it becomes pure timbre, a *corpus delecti!*”⁵

Those sound characteristics very much resonate with the distinctly Asian affinity for massive sonorities and heterophonic practices mentioned above. Talking to Varga, Xenakis acknowledges the fact himself: “[Asian music] has no constant pitch and the sound is always moving around it” even if his own affinity for non-European musical cultures tends rather to an appreciation of their globally applicable, extracted characteristics.

The final word for sound in this lecture will be on J. Cage: the combined use of rhythmic structure, charts and chance (in the form of the Taoist book I-Ching) is employed towards the liberation of sounds: liberation from tradition, meaning, and above all determinacy, in the guise of the composer's will. *Music of Changes* is certainly not the first piece to explore those devices—the immediately preceding *Concerto for piano* has already opened up those gates; it is though the first piece where those are used as crystallized principles, in an extended way which allowed Cage “to be mobile in my [his] thought than immobile always”⁶. Some words on the organization of the piece, just to give an idea of how an Eastern philosophical stance, Zen, can be transformed into compositional process: The piece consists of material taken drawn aleatorically from charts and thrown into a predetermined canvas of time. Each chart corresponds to some musical characteristic—sound, duration, dynamics, as well as tempi, density—and employs 64 elements, in correspondence to the 64 hexagrams of I-Ching, in themselves representations of states of being in perpetual flux. The

3 Takemitsu, Toru. *Confronting Silence. Selected Writings*. transl. and ed. Yoshiko Kakudo and Glenn Glasow. Berkeley, California: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995

4 Varga, A. *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis*. London: Faber & Faber 1996

5 Robindoré, B. “Eschaté Ereuna: Extending the Limits of Musical Thought—Comments On and By Iannis Xenakis” *Computer Music Journal* 20 (4) Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1996

6 Cage, John. Letter to P. Boulez, May 22, 1951, JCA-18

compositional process, far from being totally random or abolishing the composer's will, is thus a well-balanced mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy. The expressive tension between the stable temporal frame and the sonic objects randomly fitting into that is probably one of the greatest virtues of the piece, and one to be resolved on performative grounds: thus Cage's famous invitation for "performers' own discretion where the notation appears to be irrational", in the work's note.

3. Time

Coming now to the second part of our lecture, the one dealing with musical time:

Two characteristics deeply ingrained in Western civilization, namely the rationalized and well-tempered division of time plus the notion of target-directed linearity (in the form of perpetual progress), are reflected in the prioritizations of classical-romantic tradition as far as rhythm and form are concerned. Classical tonality sets the aims for the unfolding of usually sectionalized and rationalized forms, while the ideal listening experience is one of awareness of "where we are" in the form of the piece, however complex this might be. Asian cultures are often challenging this notions of linearity and segmentation in all their manifestations, and primordially in music: First Western anthropologists were struck by the substitution of linearity with cycles, repetition, stasis, lack of expectations and climaxes, lack of tension and release, starting and ending points. Well-documented reports on Gamelan music are only a subset of Balinese temporal stances overall. According to J. Cramer, "Balinese calendars are not used to measure duration; they mark off ten concurrent cycles (of differing social meaning and degrees of importance). According to Clifford Geertz, "the cycles and supercycles are endless, unanchored, uncountable, and, as their internal order has no significance, without climax. They do not accumulate, they do not build, and they are not consumed. They don't tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is".⁷

Cantéyodjayâ by O. Messiaen is one of the more complex pieces of tonight's program, as far as temporality is concerned. The composer's play with Indian rhythmic modes (*talas*) as codified in the 13th century treatise *Samgitaratnakara*, is not a mere folkloric engagement, but rather has larger structural implications, combined with a very rare instance of successive temporalities, including moment-like form, goal-directed linearity and multiple time,- according to a terminology set up by Jonathan Cramer in his article "New Temporalities in Music". *Talas* are basically additive rhythms, whose specific, open-ended morphology, is reflected in the large scale of the piece. Formally, the work consists of a web of closed and not irreversibly connected structural blocks. Their contrast and re-exposition does feed some feeling of drama in the traditional sense, even if this is perverted through the displacement of musical goals in non-adjacent sections. The blocks/gestures themselves are internally simple, minimal, repetitive, static, insistent, away from the ideal of the long line, reinforcing the impression of a "Time- Labyrinth": repetition serves not as means of clarification, ecstasy, or lament, but rather claustrophobically. Allowing ourselves a more linear description of this crumbled form, we would say that: in the beginning, the initial theme alternates quite clearly with contrasting situations in a systematic way. The labyrinth comes with the gradual disappearance of the theme, more fragmented alternation of states, non-systematic repetition of elements. Further analysis can reveal a sophisticated couplet-refrain form, but the fragmented *Dérive* ends up in gestures of monumental climax and re-exposition, re-affirming the sense of an exit from the labyrinth to the listener, as well as Messiaen's definition of the musician as a rhythmician.

Piano Distance by T. Takemitsu presents us with a less vague reflection of musical time in Japan. Three characteristics are vital for temporal perception in Japanese performing arts: The notion of *Ma* (already discussed above as the vacuum, empty space, interval in time between two thoughts, where the intensity of the creative potential lies in silence), *breathing rhythms*, quintessentially exposed in the Gagaku imperial music, through the opposition to the priority of a basic pulse and the employment of forms which are closer to the sense of inhalation and exhalation. And the principle of *Jo-Ha-Kyu*: starting slowly with a sense for pulse rather unstable, stabilizing pulse and gradually accelerating, climacting, decelerating. In short, the unfolding of organic rhythms in a blank space. Having already talked in the sound section about the ways in which the individual event is highlighted and musical lines are fragmented in *Piano Distance*, it is evident that a certain predilection for *Ma* characterizes this piece. Still, two instances of an augmenting regular flow reaching a climax, as well as a long pause, seem to offer the necessary counterbalance to this persistence, and a possible demonstration of the principle of *Jo-Ha-Kyou* in the macroform of the piece.

Takemitsu, Cage, Xenakis: spatial notation

One rather technical characteristic that *Piano Distance* shares with another two pieces in the program, namely *Mists* and *Music of Changes*, is the employment of spatial notation. Let us begin with the differences of this feature in each of

⁷ Cramer, Jonathan D. "New Temporalities in Music"

Critical inquiry, Vol. 7, No3 (Spring 1981), 539-556, University of Chicago Press

the pieces: in *Piano Distance* space notation serves a looser timing of sound objects placed in bars of equal lengths- although the sound objects themselves are often beamed in the traditional way. It proves to be an excellent graphic representation of the *ma*-influenced timing of the piece, especially as far as the timing of isolated events is concerned. In *Music of Changes* on the other hand, no rhythmic freedom at all is in Cage's mind, quite the contrary: an overwhelmingly complex gamut of very precise durations is employed, but "the tyranny of the beat is overcome by allowing any fraction or multiple of a beat to exist independently" of measure. Thus, spatial notation "is a misnomer[...] since the standard unit here is the quarter note "beat" at a changing time and not any unit of clock time" (as happens in *Piano Distance* with the exact duration of the bars). But, space notation is indispensable "in order to maintain the vertical alignment of the different layers of sound."⁸ In other words it serves mostly as an efficient tool, in the same way rhythmic structure serves as a marker or canvas for the composer's activity, without corresponding to any real temporal analogies (due to the changing tempi). Finally, Xenakis employs space-notation in the stochastic section of *Mists*. The timing could not exactly be named loose, due to the density of sound events -an ocean of noteheads designating Xenakis' chance-generated clouds – and the strict engraving of the time-space with mostly sixteenth- and occasionally eighth-note beams. Still, the visuographic aspect of this notehead-beam decoupling is ingenious as a representation of Brownian movements in (time-) space, plus it does give the performer a margin of rhythmic flexibility necessary for coping with the several impossibilities of the anti-pianistic writing. Let us conclude this small interlude on space notation, by underlining the fact that all three composers, despite the abobe mentioned subtleties in their employment of it, do feel the need to escape a long-standing feature of our Western notation, namely: the fixation of time, reflecting priorities of linearity and divisibility. Either as a representation of the Japanese *Ma* (Takemitsu) or as the virtual space where massive sonic phenomena (themselves a re-ordering of an "eternal", "out-of-time" reservoir) occur (Xenakis) or as the field of concurrence of strings of isolated events, whose only unchanging characteristic is perpetual change (Cage), space notation becomes a strong visual cue of the influence exerted by non-european views of time in today's music: a time less understood as a singular, irreversible line, but rather as a smooth empty space to be sonically experienced.

Taking a step back and looking at the already established categories of analysis in this lecture, let us make the following remarks on: one, the inadequacy of a differentiation of the "sound vs time" type, since the liquidization/spatialization of temporality mentioned just before foregrounds a radically different perception of sound itself (and vice versa); two, the paradox, where the distancing of tonight's music from linguistic models and traditional syntactic relationships is not necessarily moving towards a *per se* perception of sound, as in Asian traditional musics, but rather towards very strong visual and tactile perceptual analogies, as our (and the composer's) descriptions have already pointed at. Let us recapitulate a bit: we described *Piano Distance* as a shadowy theatre of isolated events and minimal gestures which light up and disappear in an empty canvas, *Cantéyodjayâ* as a temporal labyrinth of closed gestures, *Music of Changes* as a mosaic or pile of fragments, occasionally crumbled into a temporal canvas, *Mists* as the spatialization in specific ways of "out-of-time", frozen music material, and Dusapin's *Etudes* as melismatic lines opening up in a static and weirdly saturated space. This strong materialist grounding of the music doesn't necessarily contradict perception of sound *per se*, quite the opposite: it highlights real-time performance as the privileged field where a two-dimensional visuographic aspect of representation via notation assumes a full, 3-dimensional, sonic and corporeal being. Thus, the Asian influence, in a feedback loop from "pure sound" ideals, to image-in the form of notation originally developed with language in mind-, and back to sound-ritual, is complete and indispensable as the re-inscription of timelessness and eternity in what seemed to be unnegotiable progress.

8 Pritchett, James. *The Development of Chance Techniques in the Music of John Cage 1950-1956*, New York University, 1988

